



Three Types of Thesis About Fact and Value

R. G. Swinburne

The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 45. (Oct., 1961), pp. 301-307.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8094%28196110%2911%3A45%3C301%3ATTOTAF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J>

The Philosophical Quarterly is currently published by The Philosophical Quarterly.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/philquar.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THREE TYPES OF THESIS ABOUT FACT AND VALUE

The purpose of this article is to distinguish between three types of thesis about the existence of a fact-value dichotomy and to consider what sorts of arguments are appropriate for the establishment or refutation of each. The first type of thesis is concerned with how we do use language, the second type with how we ought to use language, and the third type with what the world is like.

I

The first type of thesis is concerned with how we do use language. There are many subtly different theses of this type with which we have become familiar in recent years but, very roughly, their pattern is exemplified as follows. Non-analytic assertions¹ belong to one or other of two classes or can be analysed without residue into assertions which belong exclusively to one or other class, and direct inferences from assertions of one class as premisses to an assertion of the other are not admitted. Following Hare, I term assertions of one class descriptive and assertions of the other class evaluative—but many pairs of adjectives have of course been devised to make roughly the same contrast (e.g. factual/moral—Hume ; descriptive/emotive—Stevenson ; descriptive/gerundive—Nowell-Smith). Descriptive assertions have the following properties : (*a*) to ascertain the truth or falsity of the assertion, one observes—if practically possible—the objects referred to in the assertions ; (*b*) whether or not such direct observation is possible, there are recognised testing procedures for reaching a definite conclusion on the truth or falsity of the assertions ; (*c*) no one person's judgment is infallible. People accept correction from others and so a contrast is made between what a thing is and how it looks, feels, etc., to someone ; (*d*) acceptance of the assertions does not involve acceptance of any value-judgments, e.g. adopting a pro or con attitude towards something—or command to do anything.

An example of a descriptive assertion would be “The table in the next room is brown”. To find out if this is true or false, we go into the next room and look at the table. We know how to reach a definite conclusion on the truth or falsity of the assertion : the table is the colour it looks to most people in daylight at the distance of a few feet. If I look and judge that it is green, but most people look and judge that it is brown—then it is brown ; it only looks green to me. “The table in the next room is brown” is thus an objective verifiable assertion. But if anyone accepts it, this does not mean that he approves of the table or its colour, or accepts any obligation to maintain the colour, or anything of that sort.

¹I choose the word ‘assertions’ to denote all utterances superficially ascribing some property to objects or events, including for example both “This is red” and “This is good”, but to exclude such utterances as exclamations and performative utterances. I avoid further precision as I am not concerned with detailed analysis of any individual thesis of this type.

Evaluative assertions have properties the exact opposite of the four properties of descriptive assertions. The class of evaluative assertions includes moral and aesthetic assertions, and an example would be "Capital punishment is wrong". One does not have to observe executions to ascertain whether this is true or false. Nor are there recognised testing procedures for establishing this, for people can, notoriously, argue till Doomsday about it. Nor is the fact that everyone else disagrees with me about the matter any compelling reason for supposing that I am wrong. I am, logically, entitled to my own principles of evaluation, and that is that. But to accept the evaluative assertion "Capital punishment is wrong" does involve my having a con attitude towards capital punishment or accepting the command to seek its abolition and to tell others to seek its abolition also, or something of the sort. Now, in virtue of the contrasting properties of descriptive and evaluative assertions, we do not claim to infer directly one from the other. Descriptive assertions are said to describe "facts", evaluative assertions to apportion "values", and whatever the "facts" may be, any evaluation of them is recognised as theoretically possible.

Now this, that I have stated at length, is an example of a thesis of the first type about a fact/value dichotomy, for it is a thesis about the way we do in fact talk. How is it to be established or refuted? Clearly, by examining our language. We investigate whether this clear-cut distinction between two classes of assertions, so that inference from an assertion of one class to an assertion of the other is not recognised, is a correct and adequate analysis of our use of language. It might then turn out that all so-called descriptive assertions in fact involved an inseparable element of approval or recommendation. It can be argued, for example, that " x is a p " entails "If you want a p , choose x ", or entails "believe that x is a p ", and that these entailments cannot be separated from " x is a p " without leaving that assertion vacuous. Or it might turn out that there were some recognised testing procedures for reaching a definite conclusion on the truth or falsity of so-called evaluative assertions. It might, for example, be the case that accepting a description of the way in which Belsen was run involved accepting the assertion "Belsen was not an ideal institution". For if anybody continued to assert "Belsen was an ideal institution" after he had accepted a description of its organisation, we might regard him as a moral pervert and so ignore his so-called evaluative assertions in analysing how evaluative assertions function—just as in analysing the concept of personal identity, we ignore the madman's assertion "I am Napoleon". Both might have so far contracted themselves out of normal usage as to cease to provide evidence about it. Under such circumstances as these, our language would not evince a fact/value dichotomy.

It is by analysing the logical geography of concepts in this way that we come to a decision on a thesis of the first type about a fact/value dichotomy, a thesis about how language is used. Now it may happen that when we do our linguistic fieldwork, we will find that for some people there does not

exist a fact/value dichotomy and for some people there does. Some people, that is, may infer—and consider they are justified in inferring—from descriptions of a thing to something one ought to do about it, whereas other people do not so infer nor consider they would be justified in doing so. In that case the logical geography of the concepts ‘good’, ‘ought’, ‘right’, etc. would differ for the two classes of people. We might find this difference either within a language-group (e.g. some Englishmen argue in one way and some in another) or between one language-group and another (e.g. there might be a fact/value dichotomy in Swedish but not in Chinese). These conclusions are conclusions about how people do in fact use language; the notion of the correctness or otherwise of their use is not applicable until we turn from the first to the second type of thesis.

II

The second type of thesis is also concerned with language, yet not with how we do use language, but with how we ought to use language. It provides a recommendation to the misguided, if any such there be, to change their linguistic habits. Such a thesis states that non-analytic assertions ought to be used so as to conform either to criteria such as those given above for descriptive assertions or to criteria such as those given above for evaluative assertions, or to be analysable without residue into assertions so conforming; and that people ought not to infer from “descriptive” assertions to “evaluative” assertions.

What could establish a thesis of this type? To begin with, it must be noted that if the thesis is true, no descriptive assertion by itself could establish it. For it is a thesis about how we ought to use language, and so, by its own definition, evaluative; and, according to the thesis, inferences from descriptive assertions to evaluative assertions are not legitimate. So arguments based simply on theses of the first type or on more general theses about the way we learn language are totally unable by themselves to establish a thesis of this second type. Evaluative principles would have to be brought in to prove the thesis. In order to convince an opponent, the evaluative principles would have to be fairly obvious ones. If they were not, the opponent would probably refuse to accept them and that would be the end of the matter, for, according to the thesis, a man is (logically) entitled to hold any evaluative principles he wishes and cannot be forced to change them. Thus, one suggested evaluative principle might be “All people ought to use language in the way that the majority use language” (in order to prove with “The majority have a fact/value dichotomy in their language” that “All people ought to have a fact/value dichotomy in their language”). But that principle would not be very likely to be accepted by any opponent of the thesis. If no better reason could be produced for the thesis, its defence would cease to be a matter of rational argument. There is, however, one—and, I suggest, only one—evaluative principle which almost all people would almost certainly accept in this connection, and this is “Distinctions in language

ought to correspond to distinctions in the world of practical importance". And so, if one could show that there was a fact/value dichotomy in the world—and whether there is or not is a matter which is clearly of practical importance—one could establish that there ought to be such a dichotomy in language. That there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world, is what I term a thesis of the third type. And so a thesis of the second type could be established—if a thesis of the third type could be established first. To the consideration of the third type, we will turn in a moment.

If on the other hand the thesis of the second type is false (viz. if there ought not to be a fact/value dichotomy in language), then any assertion (whether of the class the thesis would label 'descriptive' or of the class it would label 'evaluative') could in theory establish this. But here again surely the only good reason for merging fact and value in language (for arguing from what a thing is to what it ought to be) is that they are merged in the world. And so the refutation (as well as the establishment) of a thesis of the second type is found to depend on the establishment or refutation of a thesis of the third type.

The normal reason presented for a linguistic reform² is that distinctions in language do not correspond to distinctions in the world of practical importance and that language ought to correspond to the world in this way. Thus, to take a very simple example, the ancient Egyptians had, I am told, at one stage of their history one word for both 'north' and 'down river'. When the only major river with which they were acquainted was the Nile, which flowed from south to north, they needed only one word for these two concepts. But when they got to know of other large rivers, their language became inadequate for talking about the world in a matter of great practical import. There was a distinction in the world, of which they were now aware, between 'north' and 'down river', but not in their language. So a change would be recommended for the reason that distinctions in language do not but ought to correspond to practically important distinctions in the world. I know of no ground for supposing that this normal reason for recommending linguistic change, if it could be provided, would not be relevant in the case we are considering, nor any ground for supposing that, if such a reason cannot be provided, there is any other reason for the linguistic change. If fact and value were merged in the world, why should we keep them apart in our language—and conversely?

III

The third type of thesis is then not about language but about the world. It is a metaphysical thesis that there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world. By this is meant something like the following. The world consists of objects

²I distinguish a linguistic reform as one involving a change in conceptual framework from a mere reform of diction and/or script in which one new word (written and/or spoken) does the job of one old word (written and/or spoken). Reforms of the latter kind are advocated for very different reasons—e.g. a spelling reform may be advocated because a different spelling would be easier to learn.

of certain shapes, textures, colours, etc., with certain physico-chemical properties, and the history of the world is the history of their interaction. Values are not objective as are the objects and their colours, etc. Values do not belong to the world but belong to the spectacles through which each individual looks at the world ; and so value-words can only function legitimately as devices for getting things done in the world or for expressing one's feelings about the world, not for describing the world. This sort of way is the way in which the thesis of a fact/value dichotomy is normally put outside modern British philosophical circles. People may say " Goodness or badness is just a matter of opinion ". " I don't really believe there is such a thing as justice ". Sartre has concluded that we are not " provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behaviour ".³ This sort of thing is what is meant by the assertion of a fact/value dichotomy in the world. By its denial—the assertion that there is a fact/value synthesis in the world—is meant something like the following. Values are objective. Men have certain duties, whether or not they recognize them. The duties result from men being moral agents and objects having the properties they do. The properties of an object are not only its colour, shape, texture and physico-chemical properties ; but the purpose for which the object is to be used is as much a property of the object as are these. To put the point in Aristotelian terms : A thing is what it is, not only in virtue of its efficient and material causes but also of its formal and final causes. Fact and value are thus synthesised, and so fully to describe an object involves evaluating it, whereas if there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world, fully to describe an object cannot involve evaluating it.

What would establish or refute a thesis of this third type, that there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world ? This is a metaphysical thesis and metaphysics is a matter of synthesising all experience. Everything seen, felt or thought is put together and new high-level concepts are devised to explain and adequately to describe these. A low-level piece of metaphysics is the scientific theory which makes comprehensible patterns of radiation, clicks of geiger-counters, and a host of other phenomena by postulating invisible and non-spatial electrons in terms of which to explain the observable. Metaphysics proper seeks the synthesis not only of such publicly visible and audible phenomena but of all experience whatsoever, especially men's moral awareness and alleged mystical intuition. A metaphysical system is satisfactory to the extent to which it does this well. Which metaphysical system one constructs depends in practice on the initial data from which one starts to build one's system. Different initial data lead to different systems which explain these well and other data badly, but all metaphysicians aim eventually at a total synthesis which, as far as is possible, adequately and rigorously explains all data, all that there is. Such a synthesis, it is

³Sartre : " Existentialism and Humanism ". Trans. Mairet, p. 34. The whole work is an exposition of the metaphysical thesis of a fact/value dichotomy in the world and its consequences for us.

hoped, would remove metaphysical disagreement. Now, metaphysical systems, dependent on the way in which they are built up, may evince either a fact/value dichotomy or a fact/value synthesis. I will give one popular example of a metaphysical system of each type in order to show that whether one is to consider that there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world depends upon one's *weltanschauung*.

First, let us take materialism (which I define, in a wide sense, as the belief that matter or energy alone exist). The materialist's initial data are the achievements of science and the diverse beliefs and irrational reasoning of religious persons and other idealists known to him. Science, he argues, is ever producing new laws which explain why things are as they are. Once upon a time, for example, heredity seemed a mystery. We had to invoke a "vital force" which purposively moulded our embryo. Nowadays we see that it is all done by genes, the laws of which will soon be shown to be derivable from those of chemistry. As Newton removed the category of purpose from physics and produced rigid mathematical laws which explained simply and easily, so Darwin and Mendel did from biology, and soon we shall have no use for the word 'purpose' at all, even in psychology, except as a definitional abbreviation for 'directive correlation'. My actions will soon be shown to be determined *in toto* by my upbringing and environment. Science has produced the one workable way of explaining; explanation by divine purposes is useless for prediction. The moral consciousness too ought to be applicable in this way, and psychologists and anthropologists are beginning so to explain it. There is, for example, Freud's explanation that moral rules began as tribal rules to strengthen the tribe against other tribes. These were imposed by father on son, but the son growing up began to impose them on himself by introjecting his father image. So, if moral rules appear unconditional and objective, this is only because we have conditioned ourselves (albeit unconsciously) into believing that they are. Some such explanation as this, the materialist argues, must explain the moral consciousness, for there is no reason to suppose that the moral consciousness is the one part of the universe exempted from the rigid laws of science; and anyway no other type of explanation can account for the diversity of moral rules. So we have no reason for believing that values inhere in objects—but rather, according to the materialist, the progress of science in explaining objects without reference to their purposes convinces us that objects have only sensible and physico-chemical properties.

Next; let us consider traditional theism. The theist's initial data are the existence of the universe, the design of the world, and man's consciousness of duty as unconditional obligation—a consciousness which, the theist's own experience convinces him, cannot be illusory. The only way to explain all these data, the theist argues, is to postulate God, an omnipotent, omniscient, necessary and all-good being who made man for union with himself, and the world for his own glory, for man's delectation and to assist man to achieve divine union. It is only, he argues, because God sustains it for some

such purpose, that anything at all exists. So everything is what it is in virtue of God's purpose for it—and God's purpose for it is not merely the purpose with which an omnipotent being allows it to exist, but is its true purpose (*simpliciter*)—for the omnipotent being would not be God unless he was also all-good and what he purposes good by definition and thus to be forwarded by man. And so the theist classifies objects by reference to their place in God's plan for the world, in so far as he can see that, since for him the world is a planned world. Thus, for example, marriage is defined as (e.g.) the social unit for the procreation and upbringing of children, a definition which is both descriptive of the purpose for which an omnipotent being gave it to man (as well as of the use to which the marital relationship is often put), and also evaluative, in stating the uses to which it ought to be put. The use to which it ought to be put belongs essentially to the marital relationship as to all things—for the world and the objects in it are all value-charged, according to the theist.

It is by the metaphysical business of such system-construction and by argument between exponents of rival systems, showing the inadequacy of each other's systems to explain certain data and thus leading to a more all-embracing system, that one establishes whether or not there is a fact/value dichotomy in the world. From such a thesis of the third type we can reach a conclusion on a thesis of the second type. Of course it may be despite the fact that almost everybody has, in however vague a form, a *weltanschauung* such as the two sketched above, that an assertion or denial of a thesis of the third type will be regarded by some as futile or illegitimate. In that case discussion of theses of the second type is likely to prove equally barren, and moral philosophy would be confined to the discussion of theses of the first type.

R. G. SWINBURNE

St. John's College, Oxford.